

Defending Columbus is an insult to Italian-Americans — and to history

written by Gary Wilson
October 31, 2025



In New York City's mayoral race, Andrew Cuomo has made himself the loudest defender of Christopher Columbus — and of the myths that surround him. Facing Democratic Socialist candidate Zohran Mamdani, Cuomo has doubled down on his

long-standing crusade to preserve Columbus statues and Columbus Day, calling them “essential symbols” of Italian-American heritage.

In a series of October 2025 campaign appearances, Cuomo accused Mamdani of “insulting Italian-Americans” for his past criticism of the Columbus statue at Columbus Circle — even pointing to a photo of Mamdani giving the statue the middle finger. Cuomo insists the monuments represent Italian-American struggle and assimilation, not the atrocities committed by the man they honor.

He promises that if elected mayor, Columbus Day will remain untouched, even as he grudgingly acknowledges that “Columbus committed bad acts against Indigenous people.” As governor, Cuomo even had a Central Park Columbus monument added to the State Register of Historic Places to guarantee its preservation.

But defending Columbus in 2025 is more than cultural nostalgia — it’s an attempt to weaponize ethnic pride against truth. Glorifying Columbus is no tribute to Italian-American workers and families who faced discrimination — it’s an insult to them. Columbus was not their forerunner; he was a mercenary for empire, an agent of enslavement and genocide.

Italian-American legacy — from Sacco and Vanzetti to the labor and anti-fascist movements — stands with the oppressed, not with empire. Honoring that real legacy means telling the truth about Columbus and the system he served.

The myth and the merchant

For generations, U.S. classrooms have glorified Christopher Columbus as the daring mariner who “discovered” a new world. The songs and parades celebrate him as a man of vision and courage — the founder of Western civilization in the Americas. But this version of Columbus is one of history’s most successful propaganda campaigns.

When we read his own journals and the accounts of contemporaries such as

Bartolomé de Las Casas, a very different figure emerges — not a heroic explorer but a royal-chartered merchant of conquest. He was not the first European to reach these shores — and he didn't “discover” anything.

From Africa to the Americas

Before crossing the Atlantic, Columbus had spent years studying the Portuguese system of expansion along Africa's coasts. He saw how it worked: Sail under royal orders, seize land in the name of the crown and the church, and profit from gold, trade, and human lives. Enslavement was built into the plan from the start.

But what Columbus found in the Americas changed everything. Unlike the Portuguese, who had to fight powerful African kingdoms, Columbus met peoples who had no reason to expect invasion — and no defense against European weapons or Old World diseases.

That imbalance gave him a free hand. He didn't bother building trade posts or alliances. He went straight to conquest and plunder — enslaving the Taíno, seizing land, and demanding tribute in gold.

Columbus brought the brutal system the Portuguese had pioneered to the Americas. What began on the African coast as raiding and slaving exploded in the Caribbean into total occupation and genocide.

The human ledger

When Columbus landed in the Bahamas on Oct. 12, 1492, he was greeted by the Taíno people — peaceful, generous, and curious about the strangers from across the sea. Columbus's first recorded observations were not of geography or astronomy but of people as potential labor.

In his own log, he wrote that the Taíno “should make good servants.” Within 48

hours, he was calculating the logistics of enslavement: “With 50 men they could all be subjugated and compelled to do anything one wishes.”

Throughout his journal, Columbus remarked on the people’s gentleness and lack of weapons — not as virtues but as weaknesses to exploit. His words do not read like those of an explorer, but like those of a profiteer taking inventory of assets.

Just weeks into his mission, Columbus began capturing and shipping men and women to Spain as specimens and slaves. Historian José Asensio called it “a trifling act with fatal consequences.”

He enslaved entire communities, forcing them to mine gold, plant crops, and serve the colonizers under threat of mutilation and death.

Conquest and the birth of a new world order

Columbus’s voyages were at the beginning of modern European colonialism. His actions helped set in motion a transformation of the global economy. Gold and silver from the Americas flooded European markets, feeding a new money economy. Crops, livestock, and diseases crossed oceans, reshaping entire continents. The Spanish Empire, enriched by plunder, helped fuel the early growth of European banking, trade, and industry.

This was the violent accumulation of wealth that began in Africa and laid the foundations of capitalism — a process built on enslavement, dispossession, and genocide. The destruction of Indigenous societies, the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, and the seizure of land across the Americas created the material base for Europe’s later industrial expansion.

The real legacy

The gold ripped from the Caribbean and the lives stolen from Indigenous nations —

alongside the centuries of stolen labor and bodies from Africa — formed the basis of the violent accumulation that built European capitalism. Out of that blood-soaked foundation grew a world system that continues to exploit labor and land across the globe.

